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P.O. Box 2008, New Britain, Connecticut 06050
Phone: (203) 827-7700
Fax: (203) 827-7406

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Language, Gender, and Society in *The House of Mirth*

LOUISE K. BARNETT

Edith Wharton's novels, like those of her friend and predecessor Henry James, are always speech act dramas which turn upon what can and cannot be said according to the dictates of society: the code of verbal restraint that governs utterance is everywhere present. For both James and Wharton society is the coercive arbiter of individual behavior, but whereas in James's fiction society is a generally diffused presence that never takes on the reality of a particular social milieu, in Wharton's work it assumes the specific historical shape of turn-of-the-century upper class New York. In *The House of Mirth* it is a fully realized character whose views at any given moment are as palpably presented as the furnishings of Mrs. Peniston's drawing room.

1

Reflecting a speech community that defines living well and dressing expensively as "inherited obligations," the language of upper class New York society elevates the superficial and the frivolous to the level of seriousness. Elderly dowagers like Mrs. Peniston talk about matters of housekeeping, younger women discuss guest lists for house parties, and travelers abroad inquire after the best restaurant for peas in Monte Carlo. There is no vocabulary for genuinely serious matters like Lily's financial difficulties. To her aunt Lily's gambling debts are unimaginably shocking while to Gus Trenor they are simply unimaginable, and hence the subject of a joking banter: " 'Why on earth should you ever be out of spirits? . . . Did Judy rook you out of everything at bridge last night?' "(82)

Measurements of value and status, which dominate the social discourse of this world, insist upon the assimilation of all other values to one standard, that of commodification. Commodification, as Georg Lukács writes, "stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world. And there is no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic 'qualities' into play without their being subjected increasingly to this reifying process" (100). Society is frankly and matter-of-factly permeated with an institutionalized commodification that requires no cloak of genteel expression to disguise its concerns.¹ Instead, the novel foregrounds the quid pro quos of social life, the principle of exchange that defines all relationships in some material way. In return for being best man at Jack Stepney's wedding Rosedale will deliver a "thumping present," Lily's mother expects her to get back the lost family fortune with her face, and parvenus are constantly buy-

Department of English, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08903.

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ing their way into exclusive social circles. Commodification converts all personal relationships into quasi-commercial exchanges: where Mrs. Peniston rewards Lily's brilliant company with a clothing allowance, she compensates Grace Stepney's unexciting companionship with her cast-off clothing. Every encounter can be translated into material terms, however trivial. Giving her cousins the unwelcome news of Lily's debts, Grace has a "vision of forfeited dinners and a reduced wardrobe" (124-25).

The very name Lily Bart embodies the conflict between self and society, person and commodity, subject and object. Unlike the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin, Lily cannot flourish effortlessly; she must barter her desirability for security. To do so, however, is to sacrifice that fineness of spirit that sets her apart from the habitués of her world as surely as her physical beauty does. Indeed, whenever Lily commits herself to the goals of her society she is inscribed in the text as an object. At the beginning of the novel when she is intent upon finding a rich husband, Selden constantly thinks of her in the language of things, precisely evaluated.² Lily is a more valuable object than other women because it seems "as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay" (5). Later, succumbing once more to the lure of society, Lily undergoes a further stage in the process of reification: "Now its [her beauty's] impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard, brilliant substance" (191-92). As Robin Lakoff observes, in "language descriptive of women alone," a woman is treated "as an object – sexual or otherwise – but never [as] a serious person with individual views" (7). Objects, of course, do not speak, and Lily is never more successful as an ornament than when she is utterly silent in the tableau of a Reynolds' painting. Her own (changing) value is the subject of the novel and of everyone's appraisal. Selden tells her that she can "do better than Dilworth," a former matrimonial prospect, and Rosedale calculates her worth as two kinds of object: wife and painting.

Paradigmatically, Lily stakes an acceptable claim and then fails to pursue it to fruition: enticing Selden away from Bertha and consequently neglecting the serious business of acquiring a husband appears impulsive, but this violation of the code is more deeply motivated by Lily's developing desire to escape social definition and to express instead her own being. To a large extent this desire must be realized by freeing herself from "public language,"³ which discourages both individual self-expression and truthful communication, and by further freeing herself from a gendered discourse that denies her status as subject. In Luce Irigaray's words, "Indisputably this [denial] provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire" (133).

2

Within the dominant discourse of society gender-specific sub-categories exist that reflect the role and status differences between men and women. The empirical power of men is expressed linguistically in their more forceful and direct speech as well as by a content of what Lakoff calls "real world information" (70). In general, as Philip M. Smith writes about real speakers of English, "masculinity tends to be expressed in terms of control-related skills and femininity in terms of affiliation" (160). Men are likely to

sacrifice conversational harmony to dominance while the subordinate position of women manifests itself, above all, in polite speech at the expense of other considerations. In mixed conversation, then, men typically speak openly and directly of the matters that interest them whereas women pursue their own concerns obliquely. These differences can be observed on the surface of discourse in *The House of Mirth*, which conforms to the sociolinguistic stereotype of male domination, but underlying this overt behavior is a pattern of feminine manipulation.⁴ With Percy Gryce, for example, Lily manages every aspect of conversation according to her hidden agenda of impressing him as a suitable marriage partner. Through the ritual of making tea she reassures and attracts the timid Gryce by presenting herself as both domestic and graceful. She then offers him the opportunity to assume conversational dominance in his one area of expertise: "She questioned him intelligently, she heard him submissively. . . he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze" (20). Wharton's description is ironic, yet she leaves no doubt that this is a successful formula for conventional male-female conversation, in which an enabling feminine discourse creates the space for the male to dominate the talk exchange and proffers the illusion that he has achieved this control for himself.

Two critical conversations with Gus Trenor indicate that a more assertive and mature man requires more complicated versions of the same linguistic strategy. Picking Gus up at the station, Lily begins as she had with Gryce by giving him a chance to talk and be listened to attentively, an opportunity that men like Gryce and Trenor, economically powerful but boring and inarticulate, rarely encounter. Her suggestion of prolonging their drive initiates the second stage of this manipulative process. Having implicitly flattered Trenor by desiring to remain in his company, she explicitly does so by characterizing him as an intimate, "someone who won't mind if I'm a little dull" (82).⁵ This request serves as an unobtrusive transition from Trenor's self-involved monologue to Lily's presentation of her case, a move made more effective by her introduction of a sham topic to disarm his suspicions of being made use of. Once again Lily maneuvers Trenor into conversational dominance, although this time on a subject of her own choosing, and Wharton, with characteristic authorial tidiness, sums up the effectiveness of Lily's method: "With [Lily] . . . turning to him for sympathy, making him feel that he understood her better than her dearest friends, and confirming the assurance by the appeal of her exquisite nearness, he was ready to swear that as a man of honour he was bound to do all he could to protect her from the results of her disinterestedness" (84). Decorously presented sexuality combined with reassurance that this appeal is not dangerous works formulaically here as it did earlier with Gryce. Trenor accordingly "persuades" Lily to trust him to make money for her. He has dominated throughout this conversation in terms of assertiveness and length of speeches, characteristics typical of masculine conversation with women, but behind an artful facade of subordination Lily has orchestrated their talk exchange according to her own needs.

In the second dialogue on this subject positions are partially reversed because Trenor has a hidden agenda and Lily is taken unawares. Attempting to discard the decorum of polite speech, he reproaches Lily in the language of a forthright male discourse, yet even when he gives her an order he adds an automatic "please." Another habitual male role infuses his verbal behavior in this scene – that of the teacher instructing a female pupil.⁶ Trenor sits Lily down and lectures her on "the rules of the game." For her to under-

stand this message would mean that she must "pay up," whereas her attempt to ignore the communication only inflames Trenor's anger. Words become a euphemism for sexual intimacy in his speech since the only attention he can socially claim from Lily is that of polite conversation. Hence his reiterated complaint: "'When I tried to come up and say a word, you never took any notice.'" Or: "'I'm only asking for a word of thanks from you'" (146). Lily's prompt "I *have* thanked you" shows the impossibility of social discourse accomplishing Trenor's purpose, yet he is unable to move beyond it. When she invokes the decorum of polite conversation that he is seeking to abandon, he replies peremptorily: "'Don't talk stage-rot'" (145), yet in a sense Trenor himself is the victim of the "stage-rot" he admonishes Lily against, the polite treatment of women in his world that masks their economic dependence upon men.

In spite of his advantages in the scene, Trenor cannot win a verbal contest with Lily, not only because he lacks her adept command of public language, but because that discourse embodies standards that he respects:

"I am here alone with you," she said. "What more have you to say?" To her surprise, Trenor answered the look with a speechless stare. (147)

Trenor has already said all that he is capable of saying; receiving no agreement from Lily, his options are to move to physical struggle with her or to retreat. It is finally his acculturation as a man of honor customarily guided by social imperatives that thwarts the realization of his intentions, for he cannot bring himself to speak more plainly in the face of Lily's refusal to recognize a different kind of speech. He is all too aware that he is "not talking the way a man is supposed to talk to a girl" (146).

The social climber Rosedale is another male speaker whose lack of conversational polish causes him to speak more frankly than ordinary social discourse allows, and it is a measure of Lily's moral growth that she moves from a social view of his blunt speech as offensive to an appreciation of its honesty that can overlook the violation of decorum. But although Rosedale's openness in expressing his real concerns comes to appeal to Lily as a contrast to social hypocrisy, the themes of his speech are the familiar ones of public language that her better self rejects: the open embrace of acquisition, status, and wealth, combined with a sub-text of connivance at underhanded practices that insidiously clothes itself in the language of "business give-and-take."

To express the self that is stifled by the "tissue of social falsehoods" she must subscribe to in order to survive in society, Lily must find a language that reflects other values and a dialogue partner who shares it. Lawrence Selden proposes such a discourse, one whose definitions oppose those of public language:

"Why do we call all our generous ideas illusions, and the mean ones truths? Isn't it a sufficient condemnation of society to find one's self accepting such phraseology? I very nearly acquired the jargon at Silvertown's age, and I know how names can alter the colour of beliefs." (70-71)

The "Republic of the Spirit," whose values are personal autonomy and taste, is an ideal fleetingly glimpsed but unacknowledged by society and unrealizable within it; hence, its language is literally unspeakable, even — as it turns out — by Selden, although his and Lily's mutual recognition of such a republic remains a bond between them.

In their talk exchange at Bellomont each accuses the other of cowardice, and each is right: for different reasons, neither Lily nor Selden can make a full commitment to

the other; her directive – “love me, but don’t tell me so” – cancelling her complaint “you never speak to me” (138, 137). Articulating the “indwelling voice” they share always remains a teasing possibility in their speech, but one that convention and misunderstanding keep from realization. In their last conversation Lily’s “passionate desire to be understood,” i.e., to be treated as a subject rather than as a commodity/object, cannot overcome Selden’s passivity. She comes as close as she can to direct masculine speech by referring to “the Lily Bart you knew” in the third person and asking Selden, “Will you let her stay with you?” (309) As well as an overt articulation of Lily’s divided self, this is surely an unconscious proposal of marriage, and one with an awareness of Selden’s impossible requirements: “She’ll be no trouble, she’ll take up no room” (309). Selden consistently responds to such overtures in the conventional terms of public language that preclude truthful intercourse. Formed by “all the conditions of life” to be aloof and fastidious, he is unsuited to save Lily with the kind of commitment that enables Nettie Struthers and her husband to oppose the hardships of life together.

Both Selden and Lily find too late the word that will dissolve the distance between them: her last coherent thought before death is that “there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them” (323). He, in turn, goes to her house the following morning with “the word he meant to say to her” (324). The novel ends with this word “which made all clear” passing in silence between Selden and the dead Lily, a pointed inscription of the discourse restraints that have prevented their communication throughout the novel.

Within the social world that the text has constructed there is in fact no solution to Lily’s dilemma, no saving language. Lily cannot integrate her social and individual selves, nor can she, until the end of the novel, choose the individual over the social, the problematic status of subject over the prescribed role of object. Her thought – “if only life could end now” – reflects the reality of her external circumstances and, more compellingly, her inability to transcend them. As she realizes and accepts, Lily is irrevocably a social commodity, unfit in all respects to live other possible lives and equally unfit to live the life required by her world. She can emulate neither Bertha Dorset nor Nettie Struthers, the two women juxtaposed to her on her final evening. These women represent negative and positive models, not only of survival but of language. Significantly, throughout the novel Bertha preserves herself and destroys others with socially acceptable lies while Nettie runs the risk of self-destruction by insisting upon the truth. Both women have husbands named George, one the recipient of a discourse that conceals infidelity and undermines relationship, the other of a truthful speech which strengthens union.

Where Wharton herself was able to create a “language of feminine growth and mastery,” Elaine Showalter observes, “we are repeatedly reminded of the absence of this language in the world of *The House of Mirth* by Lily’s ladylike self-silencing, her inability to rise above the ‘word-play and evasion’ that restrict her conversations with Selden and to tell her own story . . .” (136). Lily does rise above this curtailing language by the end of the novel, and she does become capable of telling her own story honestly, both

to herself and to others. The insurmountable difficulty is finding an appropriate listener.

Although Lily's first reaction to misfortune is to preserve appearances, protecting the deceptive social self, she later admits candidly to Rosedale that she must work for a living, that she lives in a miserable boarding house, and that she owes all of the little money that she has inherited. Moreover, her confession is not part of the discourse of calculated feminine pathos that created an appealingly vulnerable image in order to manipulate Gus Trenor, for Lily wants no such favors from Rosedale. What she wants is to acknowledge her circumstances in truthful language to herself as much as to Rosedale, who is ultimately unsatisfactory as a dialogue partner: "She felt the real difficulties of her situation to be incommunicable to any one whose theory of values was so different from her own . . ." (261).

During her final meeting with Selden, whose "theory of values" is similar to her own, Lily is equally clear, if not as specific, about her situation:

"I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap. . . ." (308)

Selden can imagine nothing more in this speech than an oblique reference to marriage, the customary salvation for distress such as Lily's. Lily thus becomes able to "tell her own story" – that is, to express it – but without a receptive dialogue partner she cannot effectively *communicate* it, nor can she, in keeping with the recurring speech paradigms of the American novel, find another language, one that will free her from her story.

What Lily becomes unable to speak and live by is the public language of her social world and her sex, that discourse that has the power to save her up to the very end. Its words are known to her – at the beginning of the novel they are automatically generated when she wants to manipulate a man – and at the end they are urged upon her by Rosedale and George Dorset. By speaking what she knows to Dorset she can openly save herself and ruin Bertha. By speaking to Bertha she can save herself clandestinely and marry Rosedale. Either alternative would preserve the social self/object in its traditional form, that of the married woman, at the expense of the individual self/subject that Lily has come to value so much that she cannot relinquish it in order to survive. Nor can she empower Selden to perform the speech act that would rescue this better self, Lily as subject, to speak "the word which made all clear." Her misfortune is to evoke only male discourse which is unworthy of her, like the "eloquence" she inspires in Percy Gryce, the crude admiration of Trenor, Rosedale, and other men, the uncommitted speech of Selden. Such discourse, Showalter writes, defines women:

In one sense Lily's search for a suitable husband is an effort to be "spoken for," to be suitably articulated and defined in the social arena. Instead, she has the opposite fate: she is "spoken of" by men, and as Lily herself observes, "The truth about any girl is that once she's talked about, she's done for, and the more she explains her case the worse it looks." To become the object of male discourse is almost as bad as to become the victim of male lust. (136)

As a description of events in *The House of Mirth* this is persuasive but not entirely accurate, for although economic power is concentrated in the masculine territory of Wall Street, a feminine discourse controls the realm of social exclusivity represented by Fifth Avenue, albeit one that enunciates and upholds patriarchal values as a matter of

self-interest.

The "talking about" that Showalter refers to is actually the province of women in the novel: Lily becomes the object of a censorious feminine discourse which adversely affects her at every critical moment.⁷ Bertha Dorset begins the process by telling Percy Gryce "horrors" about Lily; later, her dramatic utterance that Lily will not return to the yacht severely undermines Lily's reputation; on subsequent occasions she continues to speak against Lily. In the major instance of the novel's inexorable process of marginalizing Lily, Mrs. Peniston revises her will to reduce her niece from chief beneficiary to mere legatee.

The female community of *The House of Mirth* makes the same demands that Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker have observed in real verbal behavior: "Girls must become increasingly sophisticated in reading the motives of others, in determining when closeness is real, when conventional, and when false, and to respond appropriately" (207). For all of her success with men, Lily is not skillful in deciphering the cues offered by her own sex. In the critical conversation with Bertha Dorset after the latter has stayed out all night with Ned Silverton and returned to the yacht the next morning, it is essential for Lily to decode Bertha's remarks and adapt herself to them – however fictional Bertha's account might be. Instead, she pursues her own reading, founded on the facts of the situation, and thus fails to comprehend Bertha's position. The talk on both sides is often interrogatory, but Bertha's accusatory assertions and rhetorical questions constitute an aggression that Lily meets with genuine bafflement. Bertha's utterances have a theme and a strategy while Lily's are merely reactive, often no more than a weak echo of Bertha's words:

B: Whenever anything upsetting happens . . .

L: Anything upsetting?

. . . .

B: I'm expected to take hints, not to give them: I've positively lived on them all these last months.

L: Hints – from me to you? (207, 208)

Lily moves from lame responses confined to the circle of Bertha's own words, and consequently imprisoned by her controlling fiction, to the more passive role of silent witness, and then to a departure "without a word." Whereas Bertha has no need of verbal reinforcement, Lily literally cannot speak: "The words died under the impenetrable insolence of Bertha's smile" (208). The power of Bertha's status overwhelms Lily's truthful version of events, yet her silence is not the silence of injured innocence alone: just as she was complicit in the relationship with Gus Trenor, here, too, Lily is culpable in having pursued the pleasures of society and forgotten her own vulnerability. She can neither uphold her innocence in speech nor acknowledge her guilt.

This same inability to speak effectively informs all of Lily's conversations with other women: those who have power – like Bertha, Mrs. Peniston, and even Grace Stepney – use it against Lily. Elizabeth Ammons comments that in *The House of Mirth* "women prey on each other – stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers – all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women sup-

plicant and therefore subordinate" (39). Since female power is indirect and fragile, based upon the manipulation of appearance and language rather than upon the manipulation of money and property that characterizes male power, possibly women cannot risk generosity to a potential rival who may threaten their own security.

Expediency predicated upon the power of status and wealth shapes the official version of events retailed by public language speakers. When Lily suggests an alternate approach to Rosedale, namely, that the falsity of stories about her should "alter the situation," he replies: "I believe it does in novels, but I'm certain it don't in real life" (256). The false version of Lily's story becomes the authorized one because it is agreeable to powerful people and because it valorizes group mores by illustrating the essential wrongness of her pursuit of freedom, her seeming to claim "the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations" (157).

For women, the prospect of marriage sanctions an unmarried "girl's" claim to a man, but Lily loses this legitimacy when she pursues Selden without such an aim and thereby places herself in conflict with a married woman. Because married women have more status, power, and freedom than unmarried "girls," Lily should have acquired the less vulnerable status before incurring an enmity she cannot afford. Lily is acutely aware that the designation of "marriageable girl" is a temporary label which she has already worn far too long, one that she has assumed unwillingly because neither society nor her own imagination offers any other.⁸ Her lack of enthusiasm for this role is an unconscious rejection of the responsibilities of adulthood/wifehood that will reify her as an object once and for all.⁹ Such an attitude places her in the tradition of male social outsiders in the American novel, characters such as Natty Bumppo, Ishmael, and Huck Finn, who show a similar reluctance to be adults according to the terms of their respective societies and are thereby feminized in their refusal to assume masculine authority.

Although Wharton chooses a female protagonist and sympathetically focuses upon the special vulnerabilities of women, in the totality of the text social determinants are just as insistent as those of sex. "So-called 'women's language' is in large part a language of powerlessness," Barr and Atkins write, "a condition that can apply to men as well as women" (94). It is always within Lily's power to make a rich marriage as her cousin Jack Stepney does, and the peripheral figure of Ned Silverton will probably end up on the same rubbish heap that Lily envisions. Lily is not excluded from society because she is a woman *per se*, but because she is a non-conformist who shrinks from her role as object and demands a latitude available only to women who *have* submitted themselves to men within the socially prescribed form of marriage. While society can make a place for the exceptional when it is conjoined with conformity, Lily's experience demonstrates that even the highly valuable and valued cannot be accepted when conventions are flouted. Selden escapes Lily's fate not only because as a man he can support himself and refuse to marry, but because he, unlike Lily, is content to live within the confines of society. He, too, is wasted, if not destroyed as dramatically as Lily. As a reminder that "growth and mastery" in the sense that Showalter applies to Wharton's own language are not tolerated in either sex in the world of *The House of Mirth*, the novel ends with the absence of the word that would save both Lily and Selden. Representing a bond that would lack the societal requirement of wealth, it remains unuttered and unutterable.

NOTES

- ¹ Wai-chee Dimock writes: "The realm of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic" (783). The pervasiveness and inevitability of this ethic is confirmed by Gus Trenor's comment on Rosedale's entrance into society: "A few years from now he'll be in whether we want him or not" (82).
- ² See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, 109-33, for a detailed discussion of "the woman as self-creating artistic object" in *The House of Mirth* (111), and Luce Irigaray: "Woman's special form of neurosis would be to 'mimic' a work of art . . ." (125).
- ³ "Public language" is Basil Bernstein's useful term for that discourse which emphasizes "a powerful sense of allegiance and loyalty to the group, its forms and its aspiration. . . . The structure of a public language inhibits the verbal expression of those experiences of difference which would isolate the individual from his group and channels cognitive and affective states which might be a potential threat" (47-48).
- ⁴ Sociolinguistic studies indicate that real male speakers conversing with women take longer speech turns, interrupt more frequently, and are generally more assertive speakers. See Zimmerman and West, 105-25, and Gumperz, 154-55. Such empirical studies ignore the kind of speech situation seen here in which a more subtle form of dominance undermines superficial control.
- ⁵ Amy Kaplan observes that in *The House of Mirth* "social intercourse depends on the use of intimacy as a medium of exchange" (449). She sees Lily's withdrawal from this economy as leading to her death.
- ⁶ Mary Ritchie Key writes: "Males are forever explaining things to women. . . . Males are the givers of information, not the receivers" (37).
- ⁷ At the same time, each stage of Lily's movement down the social ladder produces a potential male rescuer, and while none is disinterested, none is villainous. Where her former good women friends abandon her, these men reveal themselves reluctant to believe the worst and willing to help her.
- ⁸ Lakoff, 25, remarks of the label "girl" that in "stressing the idea of immaturity, it removes the sexual connotations lurking in *woman*." It also removes the adult connotations of autonomy, responsibility, and maturity associated with masculinity.
- ⁹ See Jacques Lacan, 222: "Both for every woman and for reasons which are at the very foundation of the most basic social exchanges . . . the problem of her condition is at bottom that of accepting herself as the object of man's desire . . ." (my translation).

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